

Patrice D Douglass, "Review of 'Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval' by Saidiya Hartman (W. W. Norton & Company)," *Lateral* 8.2 (2019).

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Book Reviews

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Review of *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* by Saidiya Hartman (W. W. Norton & Company)

Patrice D Douglass

ABSTRACT This review considers how *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* poses a challenge to the reader. The invitation is to stay immersed within the everyday lives of Black women and girls, who navigated the terrains of New York City and Philadelphia at the turn of the twentieth century, without fleeing into spectacle or pathology. One may assume that such is an effortless proposition that is carried simply by the desire to think about Black women. However, Hartman tacitly demonstrates that a tremendous counter-historiography must be amassed to write the stories of those who have been underwritten by the tales of politics, great Black men, shining Black starlets, or the widely pathologized Black female figure. Thus, *Wayward Lives* weaves together a beautiful narrative of the social upheaval of Black women and girls at the dawning of Northern urban space, and what would later become known as the Black ghetto. At the same time, Hartman exposes the limits of the official record and narratives which relegate the lives of Black women as tertiary, as opposed to an integral political history in its own right.

Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval. By Saidiya Hartman. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019, 464 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 978-0-393-35762-2. US List: \$28.95.

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, Saidiya Hartman poses a challenge to her reader: to stay immersed within the everyday lives of Black women and girls, who navigated the terrains of New York City and Philadelphia at the turn of the twentieth century, without fleeing into spectacle or pathology. One may assume that such is an effortless proposition that is carried simply by the desire to think about Black women. However, Hartman tacitly demonstrates that a tremendous counter-historiography must be amassed to write the stories of those who have been underwritten by the tales of politics, great Black men, shining Black starlets, or the widely pathologized Black female figure. Thus, *Wayward Lives* weaves together a beautiful narrative of the social upheaval of Black women and girls at the dawning of Northern urban space, and what would later become known as the Black ghetto. At the same time, Hartman exposes the limits of the official record and narratives which relegate the lives of Black women as tertiary, as opposed to an integral political history in its own right.

Breaking with the traditional academic mold, *Wayward Lives* offers a new and profound approach to writing. The style embodies what Hartman has termed elsewhere a "critical fabulation," which, "jeopardize[s] the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done."¹ This technique is encapsulated in delicate yet impactful and gripping prose. The narrative flows like the most captivating novel, re-casting the lives of its "cast of characters" as factual portrayals. These are not (im)possible stories but the

immanent unfolding of Black women's lives as they are handled with a Black feminist care, in the wake of the failed promises of emancipation and in the intervals of freedom. Thus, Hartman is less interested in settling the age-old score of how to position agency and structure in historical revivals of Black life and more interested in movement, refusal, repetition, banality, and stasis in the ordinary lives of Black girls and women. Violence and violation are undeniable presences in waiting. *Wayward Lives* is about Blackness in general, rather than the unique experience of any individual Black woman, girl, or queer person. Furthermore, it posits that politics can arise from ordinary spaces or from the everyday refusals taken on by Black women and girls. These figures exist queerly and otherwise, by refusing the scripts of life that were placed upon them.

Wayward Lives is structured into three books. Slavery, emancipation, and the great migration are figured centrally as the preconditions for thought that configure and align each section. Hartman does not disavow the symbolic integrity that is lost during slavery; the text holds on to social death in the afterlife of abolition. It thus enlivens the realities of existing in the in-between of subjective categorizations. This is the tale of those who lack proper names. Each section of *Wayward Lives* demonstrates that the age divide between being a Black woman or girl is murky, Black family and kinship structures are ever changing, place is never unfettered, and Black sexuality, however performed, is rendered deviant. Traditional historiography embodies a refusal to sit with such thick disavowals of being. Yet, Hartman animates these fraught spaces by suggesting that being honest about the all-encompassing deracination of Black life does not foreclose politics. Instead, it asks that politics appear otherwise, in the minor figures of history and in the everyday maneuvers to obtain mere life, rather than in the spectacular few granted exceptional Black status.

Book One, "She Makes An Errant Path through the City," introduces an ensemble of figures, a collection of geographical landscapes, and a set of historical predicaments. This section chronicles how assumptions about Black women's sexuality and sexual practices orient views of history. In this respect, Hartman spends a considerable amount of time tarrying with the early works of W.E.B. DuBois, particularly *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. In this text, DuBois paints a pathological sexual tale of two women perusing a shoe store window. Hartman critically fabulates about the lives of these women, while simultaneously weaving in a reading of DuBois, to suggest that he was not untainted by the lures of the sexual waywardness that he projects onto these two unnamed women. Book Two, "The Sexual Geography of the Black Belt," chronicles the social decay and queer possibilities that arise from attempts to arrest, or place hold upon, Black women's sexual freedoms. Whether by marking all movement by Black women as prostitution or through sexual abuse and compulsory heterosexuality, Hartman shows how Black women's sexuality sparked crises that incited riots, loomed in threats of incarceration, and produced beauty in queer performances. Lastly, the third and last book, "Beautiful Experiments," concludes with riotous noise, queer possibilities usurped by misogynoir, and the desire to break free. This section offers up the stories of those who resisted, in a "minor key," the confinement of reformatories, the constricting forces of domestic labor, and the failed security of heteronormativity. It reveals the story of those who broke free, if only temporarily, stepping willfully outside of the bounds of what was expected of their ordinariness.

Wayward Lives is nothing short of a gift. The architecture of the book is itself a dense archival exploration. The pages are filled with caption-less photos of Black women, girls, queer folk, men, and neighborhoods in ruin. It lacks citational subscripts throughout the body of the text however, it italicizes and employs quotations to mark statements and expressions grafted from other materials. A full engagement with the text requires the

reader to exert an extra level of care. An attentive reader must page the notes, revisit the cast of characters, connect the themes across stories, sections, and breaks. The task is not to page the book from cover to cover then set it down, but to pause, move forward, return, reconsider, and explore further its errant possibilities. An investment in taking Black women and girls seriously as the progenitors of a cultural politics that challenges and animates understandings of insurgency and radicality, Hartman demonstrates, requires a precise and dedicated focus. All in all, *Wayward Lives* is not a casual read. Given the significance of its excavation, it cannot be. Instead, Hartman pushes the reader not to spectate the lives of the cast of characters she presents, but to hold true the centrality of Black refusal and everyday survival as amassing a political framework that shaped the course of a century.

Notes

1. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26, no. 2 (June 2008): 11. [D](#)

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Patrice D. Douglass is Assistant Professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke University. She received her PhD in Culture and Theory from the University of California, Irvine. Her research interests include black feminist theory, the legal archive of slavery, political theory, and gender theory. In 2015, Patrice served as the Research Ambassador to the Universität Bremen, Germany where she contributed to the workshop series "Internationalization at Home." Patrice is currently at work on her first book project, tentatively titled, *Politicizing Gender: Sociogeny, Violence, and Narrative in Black*, which interrogates the narrative assumptions of political and gender theory by reading critical works in contradistinction to Black feminist engagements with the appearances of sexual violence against the enslaved in antebellum case law. Patrice's publications have appeared and are forthcoming in *The Black Scholar*, *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik: A Quarterly of Language, Literature, and Culture*, *Theory and Event*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, and *Oxford Bibliographies*.



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